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# The Meditative State of Surface

Dan Rioz

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In candidacy for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

# **The Meditative State of Surface**

by

**Dan Rioz**

**May 20th, 2009**

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*"My parents taught me that I could do anything I wanted and I have always believed it to be true. Add a clear idea of what inspires you, dedicate your energies to its pursuit and there is no knowing what you can achieve, particularly if others are inspired by your dream and offer their help." - Pete Goss*



## Acknowledgements

*"Friendship is the source of the greatest pleasures, and without friends, even the most agreeable pursuits become tedious." - St. Thomas Aquinas 1225-1274, Italian Scholastic Philosopher and Theologian*

My experience during this time would have not been what it was had it not been for these people. My dearest thanks go out to them, primarily my family, whom together has let me explore my creativity to any boundary. They have allowed me to not only succeed, but also more importantly fail at times, which in retrospect has also taught me to grow. You have always been there to support me in everyway.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my thesis committee. Julia Galloway, you believed in my unconventional materials and encouraged them from the start. Clifford Wun, your excitement and energy pushed me to be the best. You questioned my technical process every step of the way, but propelled me to finesse it even further. I thank you and value our friendship. Most importantly, Richard Hirsch, thank you for your guidance throughout this journey, I am forever grateful. You forced me to think more conceptually, beyond the mediums. The methods learned from you have taught me how to make successful work and your character has taught me how to be more than just an artist, but also a technician, leader and an educator. You are a genuine humanitarian and a wonderful mentor.

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## **MFA Thesis Proposal**

I maintain a formalist approach to creating Ceramic Sculpture. My aesthetic decisions and techniques stem from an upbringing around customizing and rebuilding automobiles. The customized automobile has always maintained its roots of industry, yet has changed in subtle ways due to the modifier. The builder invests an immense amount of time and attention into developing the perfect surface, which complemented by an exquisite color. In return, the paint scheme supports and demonstrates the vehicles form and stance. The mobility of clay allows one to illustrate the combination of a faint, flowing line, elegant curve to a sharp point, or the smallest detail. These are all visual keys that are used to highlight the form and surface of the work.

Both recurring module and monolithic structures will take shape using a compulsive style of handling materials in order to obtain form and surface perfection. The repetitive module occupies a notion of industry, while the monolithic sculptures are based from an industrial point of view; then worked into a more personalized, modified manner. I would like to generate the sensation of sensuality through the combination of the depth of color and the generosity of full copious configurations.

Sumptuous clay forms will be treated with alternative ceramic surfacing techniques. Custom automotive paint, which incorporates innovative technology, will adorn the work in an array of highly saturated colors. The paint will be applied using multiple coats and will range from an illustrious metallic, to a translucent Kandy and perhaps accented with either pearl, or flake colorants. In addition to paint, I will experiment with ceramic low-

fire glazes and luster techniques to maneuver the surface quality and alter the appearance of paint. I plan to address a variety of fundamental color relationships within these pieces. With the fusion of an assortment of eye-catching materials and the time and care devoted, I plan to utilize the fundamental nature of what entices me to Custom car culture and present for the viewer to interpret.



## Introduction

In June of 1984, the average 5 year old was fast asleep in bed well before 3am. The neighborhood in which they lived was silent, safe and peaceful. It is like any other night. That is until the walls slowly start to rumble, the windows begin to shake and alcohol fuel fumes cloud their way through the air. Then there it was, POP! POP! POP! A sonic boom like explosion of power surges through the sound waves as a 2500 horsepower motor is fired up! The sound of that engine starting is more exciting to wake up to then Christmas morning. Outside my bedroom window, just beyond the stacks of terra cotta brick and rows of old cars was the garage next door and what resided in it that would become the focal point in my aesthetic upbringing.

My neighbor, Dean Melby, was a bricklayer by day, but car enthusiast by night. Not only did he build vehicles, but he also raced them on the weekends. On the nights when the rumbling sounds of exhaust awoke the neighborhood, it was a gathering like no other. Families fled their houses to catch a glimpse of the beast creating such a noise; the truck

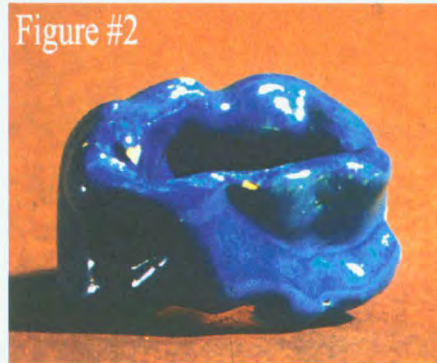


Figure #1

was called "*Grandpa's Dream.*" (Figure #1)

Although one might believe this to be a disturbance, our neighborhood thrived on it. One engine starting forged a close-knit bond between fellow neighbors, a bond that appears to becoming less apparent in our present culture.

The year of 1984 was a stepping-stone in my personal development. Countless nights and weekends were spent hanging out in Melby's garage with my father learning about cars, while the mornings were spent in kindergarten, the first step of my educational career. I learned so much, however after you look past the oversized pencils and the alphabet, all I remember is clay. The project was a single clay pinch pot that became engulfed in the brightest gloss blue glaze imaginable (Figure #2). Following this assignment, I took it upon myself to dig the backyard up in search of my new favorite material. Although my intentions were to create, my perceptions were slightly skewed. I had not yet fully understood this material and all of its characteristics. I feel the material will always be a part of me with regards to my artistic creation.



My childhood was spent in Evans Colorado, a small suburban city in the town of Greeley. Northern Colorado to me holds a beauty unrivaled by any other area, to the east lays desolate plains, to the west, majestic mountains and in Greeley, you can see all of this with a simple turn of the head. To this day, a sense of amazement flows over me when I see it all. The visual sensation of seeing such drastic variety in terrain for me is merely paralleled by the site of the Grand Canyon.

At an early age, children were taught a few simple lessons; to make friends, be creative and to work hard for what they wanted. We had to be resourceful. These lessons have



inspired my ability to look at all materials for what they offer as opposed to what they are meant for. For this reason, the work formed during this thesis is based from these childhood ideals.

Throughout my childhood, prior to taking any art class, I became aware of my internal aesthetic. I was drawn to things of curvaceous, odd angled shapes and brilliant colors. For me, what I considered cool was also associated with what I also considered enjoyable. Even as a young kid, the automobile implied a sense of freedom and power. My visual reaction toward them was as powerful as my sense of hearing them. The smell of alcohol rich fuel and burning rubber would spark similar euphoric sensations. Spending my childhood next to a social defined gearhead has had immense influence in my artistic lifestyle.

Like kids eager to catch the ice cream truck, gearheads would congregate to the Melby garage. The adoration for the custom automobile was always a common topic. These men would share tales filled with pride followed by those of despair. Each night, I absorbed what they had to say, and despite being a child, I was welcomed into this boys club, at least until I had to go to bed.

Historical lifelines of the automobile could be drawn up from merely visiting Melby's property. (From the rusted shell of a 1930's era Chevy, to the 1950's era Mercury rolling chassis, or the 1930's era Willy' coupe being rebuilt, there were stories at every turn. From the ground up, a build always seemed to be in progress. On one such occasion, I

had the pleasure to be a part of a 1939 Chevy Sedan rebuild. I was able to watch these men pour the hearts and souls into this project. The project was for "Uncle Jim," a man who with one arm did more than just sit back and watch people work; he got in there and worked! An unspoken bond between man and automobile was witnessed.

Parents have the instinctive nature to care for their children as if the world depended on it. Car enthusiasts will inherently carry similar traits for their project cars. The bond between the maker and the product, or in this situation, the gearhead and the car, is one misunderstood by many. My first car was a 1969 Chevelle. The state of the car was meager, slightly dismayed, but alongside my father we transformed it.

I was at a state in my life where I felt little self worth. I frequently found myself in trouble. The relationship between my father and me was one that even earthquakes and violent aftershocks could not compare to. We could fight about the color of the sky and neither would agree it was blue. However, when the Chevelle rolled into our driveway, our storm would settle. My father's past reverence for cars and my newfound respect for hard work would guide us down a new road.

What humbly limped in as a historic artifact was painstakingly renovated into a modern automobile. When not earning a paycheck, I was investing (into a skillful addiction.) Working along side my dad, sharing similar monotonous movement, we took apart a car and rebuilt a machine. Our journey sent us on a path of personal enlightenment, as we forged a friendship and began to bond as father and son.

## Automotive Historical and Contemporary Influence

Our nation has become obsessed with popular culture. Today's current trend of absorption seems to be from television reality shows. Whether it is a way to win money, find a bride or groom, my favorites are the makeover shows. However, the makeovers I speak of are strictly of the automotive sort. There has been a resurgence of life brought back into car culture. Popular shows such as American Chopper, Monster Garage, Biker Build Off and Overhaulin have jumpstarted the slow heartbeat of the automotive popular culture. These shows allow the viewer to peek into the artistic lifestyle of custom car and bike building. It is a display of not only the work, but also the journey. Although the commercial success has brought it to the level it is today, it was a single man who truly began the custom car movement.

The art of the custom car dates back to the 1940's, although the work most often remembered for being innovative was done in the 1960's. The man who easily most recognized for being the godfather of custom car culture is Kenneth "VonDutch" Howard. (Figure #3)



*"He got his start working for his father who happened to be a sign painter.*

*VonDutch practiced pin stripping along side his dad, an art form, which in itself dates back to the early Egyptians and Romans whom used the technique to decorate their racing chariots."*(1)



VonDutch's big break came from a bet in a garage he worked as a clean up boy. There had been a bike in need of paint; he felt he had seen enough at work to complete a job himself. A day later, the garage opened to the amazement that the young boy not only did a great job painting the bike but also added his own touch using pin stripes. Soon after VonDutch became the shops bike pin striper.

The pinstriped motorcycle had become well known in Southern California where VonDutch resided. Numerous people began to demand that their vehicle be "*Dutched*," a term used solely for a VonDutch paint job. Earl Bruce desired to have an original paint job from the master; little did he know his car would change the custom car world forever.

The 300 SL Mercedes Gull Wing (Figure #4) would be the first car of its stature to undertake such a drastic transformation. World War 1 fighter planes heavily influenced VonDutch. These planes often



were painted with flames rolling out of an exhaust manifold, vent or engine area, giving them the appearance of being on fire. He figured he do the same for the car. The Mercedes was engulfed in painted flames, which rose upward from the undercarriage. The typical response was that he had desecrated a shrine and Bruce was a fool for allowing him to do so. However, after standing his ground and justifying that it was a direct intention of his self, people began to see VonDutch as an innovator. His actions

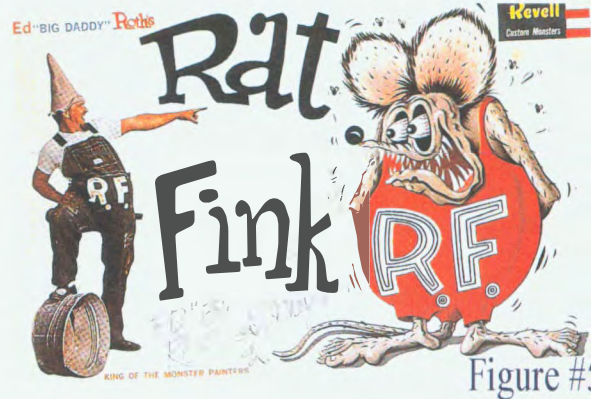
caused people to realize that customizing a car using either fabrication or paint was done to personalize their automobile, to show others who you are.

*"Von Dutch, as he is almost universally known, is variously credited with inventing the over-the-top decorative mode of pinstriping that became the hallmark of hot-rod modification, and with being the first person to airbrush monstrous caricatures onto T-shirts -- inspiring Ed "Big Daddy" Roth and thereby millions of impressionable prepubescent minds, not to mention jump-starting a billion-dollar niche of the garment industry. He's also said to be first in the chain of idiosyncratic weirdo's who married West Coast blue-collar popular culture to high art, a feverish hybrid that blossomed in the 1980s as Lowbrow art. Some even claim that Dutch was greater than the sum of all these -- that he was a latter-day Leonardo da Vinci, albeit a drunken, erratic, cantankerous, even sociopathic one."*

*-Doug Harvey, LA Weekly (2)*

In the footsteps of VonDutch soon followed George Barris and Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. Barris creativity propelled him to Hollywood stardom, this was in part of his groundbreaking custom cars used in many movies and television shows; cars such as the Batmobile, and the Munsters Koach. George created his first full custom from a used 1936 Ford convertible before he graduated from High School. This automobile became a modern day business card and lead to his first commercial customer. Shortly after building the car, George formed a club called Kustoms Car Club, based out of Los

Angeles, where the first use of "K" for kustoms appeared. On a completely different creative level was Ed "Big Daddy" Roth who is most recognized for the cartoon character "Rat Fink," (Figure #5) also he was known for creating completely original one off automobiles from fiberglass and metal. His outlandish designs had transcended into Revell model cars, which allowed any child to build a



custom car. Many consider him the Salvador Dali of the Custom car movement. These three individuals are frequently credited as being the hero's / role models of almost every builder or customizer out there in the present day.

Just off the beaten path in the heart of Long Beach California, lies a building once seen as a small bike shop, but today is viewed as a marketing superstore; that building is *West Coast Choppers*. They are known for building in your face aggressive one of a kind kustom choppers. The man and leader of this band of motorcycle outlaws is the one and only Jesse James. As a former bodyguard, but always an aficionado of cars and bikes James quick rise to stardom is due in part to the Discovery Channels choice to showcase his talents on television. Yet, an even larger part of his success is due to his blue-collar work ethic. The West Coast Chopper is a conceptual machine displaying aggression in its form and stance, its paint scheme calls for attention, but it is the decibels from the exhaust that scream get the hell away. Although the concept is an aggressive one, the process involved in the creation is pure concentration and joy. James utilizes ancient



metal working techniques to create the project. Using the English Wheel and a hammer, James will fabricate a standard sheet of aluminum into a gas tank. He takes pride in his work and knows that all the hard work, blood, sweat and tears will allow him to prevail. James states, "There's nothing like someone walking up to you and asking who made the tank or the pipes on your bike and replying I did." James is a metal fabricating marvel, he can make just about anything as seen on Monster Garage, a television show in which he hosts. He has just as much personality as his own kustom creations. His bikes are meant to be ridden hard and fast, that is just his style. (Figure #6)



To the east of the LBC, deep in the heart of Dallas Texas is another organization making a quick name for themselves, Martin Brothers Bikes. A two-brother team led by Joe Martin, owner/fabricator/painter/musician and assisted by younger brother Jason. With a Jesse James bike, you feel the need to ride it, with a Joe Martin bike you polish it and put it back a top its pedestal. These curvaceous creations give truth to the term rolling sculpture. (Figure #7) Martin shapes metal as if it were clay. The material in his hands is



quick and responsive. With a little hammering, cutting and welding he creates unique forms amongst a bike frame. When everything is combined, the bike possesses a low-slung stance with what Martin refers to as a progressive style. He originally began as a painter,

practicing on sheets and old car parts as a kid. He branched out and began painting cars and trucks



professionally, which led him to start working with metal. On these bikes Joe handles it all, from the first cut and weld of metal to the last drop of paint, these bikes are made by him and only him. This particular process of building gives him a sense of completion and accomplishment. Leaving his hands, he knows that the bike is truly as great as he can make it at that given point. A sense of accomplishment and pride comes over the artist. I had the chance to speak with Joe Martin via phone, this was a list of questions asked followed by his responses.

**How would you classify your work, old school, modern, postmodern, or contemporary within popular culture standards?** *I see it as progressive, cutting edge, a step ahead of the others, yet a combination of the new and the old.*

**What do you look at for inspiration in your work?** *I like exotic cars, new and old cars. I look at lines and shapes, I listen to heavy music and I sketch everything out I see.*

**As far as artists go, whom or what do you look at?** *In the beginning, I liked H.R. Giger, but now not so much artists themselves, but art with a defined function.*

**Do you feel as a builder it is important to handle as much of the work as possible, or are you comfortable with facilitating work to others, if so how do you feel about those who simply design, let others build, but receive all the credit?** *A builder maintains credibility when they do it themselves; you appreciate it and are appreciated for it. The hand on aspect is what it's about for me.*

**What is it about building that gives you the most satisfaction?** *The metal working process definitely is the most fulfilling.*

Martin Brother's bikes have become very well known and respected in all aspects of the automobile industry. Despite fame, the brothers are humble and grounded. With numerous builders around the world, and counting, Martin Brothers maintain leadership in the field. Joe continues, working creativity with a child-like sense of awe and amazement, as each piece of metal transforms into a state of the art motorcycle.

### **My Artistic Journey**

From an early age, my influences in car culture were always very clear to me; it was what I knew and it was who I learned from. However, while beginning this journey in creating this body of work I felt the need to utilize my intuitions more than my influences. This allowed me to try to develop new techniques and experiment with new materials, yet it left me conceptually void. I sat back and analyzed my intentions, finding that the only way to understand them was to learn from those around me. Through discussions with

peers and educators, I found myself submerged into finding historical and contemporary kinship who explored either the same materials or conceptual ideas.

I live a process-oriented lifestyle. There is a step and structure to everything I do, a compulsive nature you could say. The exploration of an idea is stimulating, the journey in which carries ones self from point A to point B is filled with obstacles and adversity. A person's character can be questioned simply by how they handle themselves in these situations. The power of optimism can help you overcome such daunting tasks.

From the start graduate school questioned my motives. The tradition of the material and the craft was a strong topic of discussion within my work. I had visions of merging materials in a fluid manner, those which were clear to me from the start. Making believers out of my mentors, peers and audience would require poise through form, color and execution.

Throughout my many artistic and creative endeavors, I often find myself incorporating the things I love and know. Sometimes these things are not a natural juxtaposition, but I have explored the possibility nonetheless. I approach projects with an "it can't hurt to try" attitude, in similar fashion of that of California artist Billy Al Bengston. With immense respect for both visual art and car culture, Bengston, a motorcycle racer in the late 1960's, who would indulge his aesthetic obsession by continually painting his machines on a weekly basis, was not afraid to merge his technical and artistic knowledge with one another. Bengston began to employ the tools and materials of the car world and



adapt them to fit his artistic desires. Bengston was an innovator, his process assisted in bridging the gap between the car culture and the art world.

*"We never look at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves." (3)*

I find myself currently channeling childhood lessons as well as adapting similar viewpoints as Bengston. I weave together the concepts stemming from both an automotive-based background and a craft based environment. The combination of two completely different materials, clay and automotive paint, are the source of my newest obsession and exploration. With both materials are rich in history and process, a mutual respect for each medium has been taken, however it does not stop there. The different materials are now merged with the expectation to create work that is both thought provoking and visually overwhelming.

Clay has offered me the ability to work quickly through my designs, as three-dimensional sketches. California artist Ken Price has described clay as, "*the underground material of Postmodernism*," because of its inherent form changing qualities. While on the other hand, automotive-based paints have given his clay forms vitality and new life. The depths of such saturated colors enhance the forms in ways traditional ceramic glaze has not been able to offer me. Gazing over the painted surface is like looking at diamonds through a piece of Jolly-Rancher candy, unbelievably translucent, yet highly saturated and glowing with color and reflection from beneath the surface.

In order to give artistic meaning to my work I needed to make myself more aware of where my ideas and general thoughts derived from, while also analyzing my intuition. Having always found myself to be a visual learner, I quickly began to submerge myself into the imagery of other artists. Through visual stimulation I gravitated more towards a variety of artists works in hopes that my intuitive nature and aesthetic sensibility would draw me toward specific imagery; imagery, which I felt, was close to my current aesthetic trends. Through these specific studies, I found many of the individuals pushed towards philosophical research as a way to find themselves in their work. Whether it is Mark Rothko, often drawn into personal investigation, or Constantine Brancusi, who through philosophical readings would determine his own personal philosophical ideologies on what he considered to be true carving and in a sense true sculpture.

I found that writing down every feeling I had towards my work, aesthetic nature, and my influences allowed me to engage in a new dialogue with my work; a dialogue, which was closely mirrored with that of philosophers such as John Dewey, Piet Mondrian and Sol Lewitt.

*"Art denotes a process of doing or making. This is true of fine as of technological art. Art involves the molding of clay, chipping of marble, casting of bronze, laying on of pigments, construction of buildings, singing of songs, playing of instruments, enacting roles on the stage, going through movements in the dance. Every art does something with some physical material, the body or*

*something outside the body, with or without the use of intervening tools, and with a view to production of something visible, audible, or tangible." (4)*

Within my chosen materials, Dewey's words support my thoughts on process and the act of creating. The journey of creation justifies the conceptual nature of the work. My expedition through uncommon materials allows me to arrive at a destination of reflection. Utilizing clay, a common material known for its imperfections and sometimes course surfaces, and transforming it through process into a well molded material capable of producing a high gloss shine allows the viewer to reflect with me. Any automotive painter knows the devil is in the details and ninety percent of a paint jobs success is in the prep work. A dialogue between the material and the artist allows them to feed off one another. Every imperfection in the material must be pinpointed and resolved prior to paint work; it is up to the maker's skilled hands and eyes to detect such imperfections. It is my intention to provoke my audience into exploring my forms visually, from both near and far, in hopes that they will have a preconceived notion of what clay is capable of and leave with a greater respect of the materials potential.

### **The Technical Process**

*"Craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be loving it; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised." "To be truly artistic, a work must also be esthetic-that is, framed for enjoyed receptive perception. Constant observation is, of course, necessary for the maker while he is producing. But if his perception is not also esthetic in nature, it is colorless and cold*

*recognition of what has been done, used as a stimulus to the next step in a process that is essentially mechanical." (5)*

The technical process has been chosen in regards to my current work, is one of vast amounts of planning and research. Imagery bombards my mind regularly; it is my job to harness that into working material. Through brainstorming and sketches, my ideas come to developmental fruition. Descriptive details outline the sketches, which await the chance to be questioned and interpreted. Through the research, expansion of an image of a conceptual nature derives and the work carries over to the next stage. The technical methodology splits into two extremely diverse materials, clay and paint.

### **The Technical Process: The Clay**

The Materials: *Number One Pottery Plaster*

*Low-Fire White Earthenware Casting Slip*

*Any general clay body*

Prior to diving into the creation of my forms, I had to research the likelihood of my unfamiliar materials juxtaposition. Casting Slip tends to be on the insubstantial side of things when dealing with structural surfaces; however, it maintains a porous state. When you begin to transfer to the more dense stoneware bodies, vitrification becomes a factor..



With the addition of the multiple layers of paint and automotive body filler, I was confident in the paint's ability to reinforce the clay's structural integrity.

By referencing sketches, a solid form is rendered out of scrap clay. At this stage, it becomes critical to alleviate any imperfections to the form, this will aid in the creation of the mold. A healthy mix of water and WD-40 assists in the smoothing out of the piece. The water in the beginning stages helps smooth out imperfections, but this builds up a residual slip. WD-40 (oil-based lubricating spray) compresses the clay particles, while also freeing the smoothing tools from any friction; the result is a burnished surface.

The objective for making the creation of a solid form free of imperfections is to utilize it in the mold making process. A polished and sophisticated form, similar to the desired painted surface is ideal for the re-creation of the cast forms. Refined forms promote quick workability, and cut down in prep time prior to paint. With a clean mold, the castings will need minimal cleanup before firing and very little after firing.

Low fire casting slip is poured into the mold and sits for fifteen minutes. This allows the plaster to absorb moisture from the slip and create a thin shell of clay. The remaining casting slip is poured out back into the bucket and the mold is left to sit for an hour. During this time, the clay shell continues to strengthen until it can be slowly removed from the mold. With piece in hand, I strive to remove seams or surface flaws using a soft rubber rib. When the piece gets to a bone-dry state, it is sanded using a scotch-brite pad, which to me has become the most successful form of non-clogging sanding material to be

used with clay. From this state, the forms go into a kiln and are fired at 1950 degrees Fahrenheit. Post firing includes the tedious repetition of sanding using 220 grit wet-dry sandpaper. This fastidious methodology smoothes the form to a point where it is ready to be painted. The figure structure is free of imperfections and its proper shape is reveled.

### **The Technical Process: The Painted Surface**

The Materials: *2k high build primer*

*Basecoat/ Colorcoat*

*Clearcoat*

With any object where paint is to be applied, it is important to properly prepare the piece. It is imperative that the surface be free of marks and imperfections and should be cleaned, free of wax, grease and dirt. When using fired clay as a canvas for paint, it is important to keep the piece at a porous state, this allows paint to absorb into the ceramic form.

A high build primer is most desirable, due largely for its ability to be coated in a thick manner, seal the ceramic surface and add strength to the form. Unlike some primers, 2k primer creates a film that has the ability to fill scratches on a surface; where as other primers merely create a seal between the surface and the next coat of paint. However, with a high build primer, the user must go back into the form, using 400 grit wet-dry sandpaper and sand down the primer. This stage of sanding re-creates the smooth surface, while also hiding any imperfections not seen by the artist. The reason such a fine

grit of sandpaper is used, is to ensure the basecoat will be even. Anything with a lower grit would allow surface blemishes to be visible through the paint.

The task of the basecoat and colorcoat is to provide color. Containing an extensive range of colored pigments and effect substances, it plays a significant role in establishing the visual impression made by the painted structure. A general distinction can be drawn between a solid-color, metallic paint, metal flake surface, or pearl finish making up most basecoats. Colorcoats can range from translucent to opaque in any color or finish. While the basecoat can be used as the finished color, it also aids in the layering of colors and creating depth in the painted surface. For an example, a green candy paint, which is translucent in nature, is applied over a silver metallic basecoat; the given surface will be one of great depth of green color. The viewer will be able to peer into the surface, while the light reflects from the metallic layer and omits not only a glimmering sensation of metallic, but also the color. The main objective of a basecoat, much like ceramic underglazes, is to allow the painter to build up a rich surface, full of color, but in fewer coats of paint.

The final coat, clear-coat seals everything else in and is pigment-free. It has to withstand particular challenges such as resistance to sunlight and weather, but also to industrially generated chemicals and natural, biological influences (bird droppings etc.). Furthermore, the focus of the clearcoat layer is to create a very high scratch resistance to the form even after aging.

## **The Technical Process: The Methodology**

*"For the artist the search for a unified expression through the balance of two opposites...one aims at the direct creation of universal beauty, the other at the aesthetic expression of oneself... has been, and will always be, a continual struggle."(6)*

Dealing with self-expression can be a daunting task, as it forces one to realistically analyze the inner self. If art is to come from such an internal place, the artist must be willing to step on the throttle, no turning back, and invite others in. For me it has been a difficult task, as I was confused by my personal artistic intentions. Previously I was a technically driven artist, and the injection of concept in relation to form was never a concern. My work was a manifestation of an intuitive aesthetic. Currently, my forms are created through enhanced thought, for not only the objective outcome of the work, but also the technical process carried out along the way.

The process of creation is what truly drives me to create and make art. Knowing I can mold material into work, which is then unrecognizable as that material, inspires me. It is an exhilarating achievement. Clay inherently carries difficulty when attempting such tasks. The material cooperates through the forming stages, however, the "*L.A. finish fetish*" look I desire is achieved through utilizing the obsessive control portion of my personality. I could use a more paint friendly material, such as a resin, or a plastic, but that takes the challenge out of it. It cuts my artistic journey and struggle short, not to mention it is not the typical material an audience would expect. I believe my choice of material will cause my audience to re-think their first impressions of the work, thus



causing them to give it a second look and form new questions in regards to it and my intentions.

Due largely in part to my fastidious working process, I can often be found working in a state of solitude. Art is a language of expression and each material carries with it a different dialogue. The language and the object, the product of art, are present even when the artist works in solitude. The work is there in progress, and the artist must become both maker and critic.. (7) The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works.... (8)

Solitude requires patience and delicate care for the material. When approaching work in progress, my intention is to familiarize myself with it and reacquaint with my previous stopping point. I must clear the mind and focus on the task, thus thrusting myself back into my artistic trance. I am engulfed into a meditative state, where the world around me speeds up and slows down at the same time. I am consciously aware of my actions, but fail to realize the reality around me. Thoughts of experience, memory, and bliss cloud the head. As Rothko accurately points out,

*"Art has often been described as a form of escape from action. It has been pointed out that the artist, finding the practical affairs of the world too unpleasant, withdraws from the world of true activity and ensconces himself in a world of the imagination in order to exempt himself from this unpleasantness."*(9)

I remain optimistic, as it propels me to continue working, no matter how monotonous the actions may be. A negative mindset will compromise the integrity of the finished surface.

I welcome the bond between the material and myself. As the maker, one must directly understand the substance at a level that will lead to the development of the material to its full potential. To ensure perfection of shape, form and surface, the material must be meticulously crafted by hand. I infuse a similar viewpoint on the creation of an artists own work to that of Constantin Brancusi (Figure 8), a historic artistic icon, we share similar working process. The following is a statement Brancusi made discussing his bronze work that discusses just that.



*"When the roughcast was delivered to me, I had to stop up the air holes and the core hole, to correct the various defects, and to polish the bronze with files and fine emery. All this I did myself, by hand; this artistic finishing takes a very long time and is the equivalent to beginning the whole work over again. I did not allow anybody else to do any of this finishing work, as the subject of the bronze was my own special creation and nobody but myself could have carried it out to my satisfaction." (10)*

### **MFA Thesis Artist Statement for *Clay Dialects***

I maintain a formalist approach to creating postmodern Ceramic Sculpture. My aesthetic decisions and techniques stem from an upbringing around customizing and rebuilding automobiles. The customized automobile has always maintained its roots of industry, yet has changed in subtle ways due to the modifier. In a meditative state of solitude, the builder invests an obsessive amount of time and attention into developing form and surface perfection. This is done through a compulsive style of handling the materials, which is then complemented by an exquisite color. The mobility of clay and paint together allow one to illustrate the combination of a faint, flowing line, elegant curve to a sharp point, or the smallest detail. These are all visual keys that can be used to showcase the form and surface of the work. The work here generates a sensation of sensuality through the combination of the depth of color and the generosity of full copious configurations.



## Body of Work

*"Our argument shows the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already. Just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the mind can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of change into that unchanging reality, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of reality, and of the brightest and best of reality, or in other words, of the good." (11)*

Ideas serve as the conceptual fuel for creation; technical motion guides one through this creation. My approach to art is one of blissful aesthetic driven emotion. The creation of work, which is born from optimistic ideals results in euphoric sensation throughout the working process. Through conceptual confidence, I create work that signifies ideologies guided through automotive-based structuralism. I pay homage to the mechanical nature of the automotive culture, while embracing the holistic sensation implied through artistic creation. Although my work is ostentatious, it gives rise to tranquility through visual inspection and thought. Slick finishes are married to forms, causing light to bounce and echo across the gallery and spark interest from the viewer. Repetition of form inspires a transcendental state.

1,051,200 minutes of investigation, manual labor and lack of sleep, 140 gallons of casting slip and \$3500 worth of paint was displayed in the MFA group show, titled *Clay Dialects* at the Davison Art Gallery at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, New York during the spring of 2004. This body of work was a culmination of my mutual respect for the

craft of clay and the adoration for the automobile. My intentions for the work were to facilitate dialogue between the audience and the forms through inspection and reflection. Reflection becomes rationale for the work, as it is a key component in both installations present. It transcends through the reflection of the artist, personal interpretation of the viewer and the reflective surface of the work.

On exhibit were two installations, each physically focusing on the multiple, and conceptually in regards to meditation through process and reflection. Monolithic structures suspend in a downward state, while on the opposing wall, a multitude of recurring modules absorb the given space as well as spill out to the floor. The blue-collar background is where I believe my core audience lies; however, I am optimistic upon further investigation the allure of the work will begin to lure a more sophisticated audience as well. Regardless, the work is displayed concerning viewers of all sizes, from the smallest to the tallest; each experience will be their own.

### ***Triptych Tank Trio***

As the viewer peers into the gallery, a set of three forms immediately lures the them to the far back wall. Having been structured from streamline design of the 1930's these considerably sizeable forms are representational of stretched out custom motorcycle gas tanks. (Figure 9)



Figure #9

*"The concept of streamline in America was generally seen as the most modern of styles, a popular expression of machine art. It signified a continuing belief in the beauty and function of the machine...Influenced by the smooth designs of contemporary airplanes, streamlining was characterized by an ovoid gliding form, the much admired teardrop shape, and by smooth continuous surfaces; thus representing a shift from the internal to the external of the machine." (12)*

Flourished designs of saturated chromatic effect float atop a rich black sculptural canvas. The surface is one of glass like proportions. Three feet in length each of these forms are suspended against the wall in a vertical state. From the infinitesimal tip of the form to the globular gathering below, the work defies gravity.

The custom motorcycle, or "chopper," has recently gained newfound popularity through television. Despite these shows, a new era has emerged in bike building. Whether bolt on parts or hand formed "tins," (fenders and gas tanks,) builders of various skill level take part in this cultural resurgence. While many bikes are bought off the lot, it is the injection of aftermarket parts have given the ability to personalize one's machine. The largest of the transformations are in regards to the gas tank, it is the center of attention for the rider as well as the most common object still found on a custom bike, as many have shifted to fender free bikes. The gas tank is an aesthetically integral element to the overall puzzle. It establishes the objective personality of the form, while also defining the builder. Therefore, in response to these ideals, I have chosen to adapt a streamlined, gas tank like structure to these particular forms. It is my aim to have these minimalist



sculptures be easily identifiable by my audience and trigger personal thought from them. The forms are a byproduct of an adaptation of the custom car and chopper culture, thus becoming relics of my reflection and personal journey through my past and artistic expedition.

*"In their simplicity and abstraction, such works are certainly an offshoot of then-contemporary Minimalism. But unlike rigorously theoretical Minimalist art, these works are upbeat and accessible. Their often bright colors and manufactured appearance recall Pop Art's evocation of commercial products."*

(13)

Created using a simple three-piece plaster mold and casting slip, these identical primary structures become bisque fired canvas. While the forms speak of streamline design and motorcycle parts, the surface is an offshoot of the California "*fetish finish*" movement. While in this particular movement many forms were created using materials more adaptable to the painted surface. However, I feel the need to emerge with similar outcomes while utilizing unfamiliar material to the movement. Not out of a rebellious manner, but out of the determination of manipulating a material that inherently carries the makers touch and transforming the surface to the point where I have removed any notifying remainders of my own touch. Providing machine-like finishes to the work, removing any traces of my journey is my desired outcome. The ability to create ceramic work with similar traits of mass production through craft has become my fetish.



Color defines emotion; I signified tranquil emotions full of energy by employing the colors yellow, blue and green, all over a black base. The set of three is coated in numerous layers of automotive paint. The coloring process is set up like this. Tank one, which is positioned far left, appears to be black and yellow. Where as the center tank looks to be blue and black, and the far right is seen as green and black. Although this much is true, upon further investigation the true depth of color is reveled. While the black paint is of the deepest opaque shade, it gives rise to the colors that are translucent and over saturated. What appears to be shading from a far, upon inspection two varied tones of metallic pigment emerge from beneath the candy like colors. These colors are harnessed by graphic details that have been added during the process. Asymmetrical flame patterns crawl up the forms; each pattern being similar shading, but varied in the colors previously stated. The use of the flame graphic is to pay homage to Von Dutch and my automotive roots while also revising imagery that in the early stages of kustomizing was the signifying mark of a kustom. The transition of color was presented in a way to point out relation, as "Zip-lock" put it so clearly, "*yellow and blue make green.*" In addition, I choose colors that could relate to one another, regardless of the tank order.

*"Successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perception." (14)*

### ***Modular Wall Structure***

Ominous groupings of bubble like shapes peer over the partitions in the Davidson Gallery. Regardless of ones position in the space, the formations grand scale creates an optical draw that brings ones eyesight toward the installation. The arrangement is of 408 individual slip-cast tiles, each appearing to be composed of six spherical-like undulations. Measuring vertically twelve feet, as well as horizontal, all are secured to the far left wall of the gallery, while also finding their way to the floor as far as four feet from the wall. An ocular orchestration occurs as the tiles are placed in an alternating stance. Amongst the negative space of the groupings, a crisscrossing of wavy lines creates a *perceptual abstraction* as the black background comes to surface. This inherently creates the illusion of movement and depth. Using material of modern technology available in automotive paint, the tiles covering is one of color-changing capabilities.

When one looks at something, you are not seeing color of the object itself, but rather the electromagnetic light waves reflected from it. Light, as we see it with our eyes, is composed of all colors of the visible spectrum. When all colors of this spectrum are reflected from an object's surface, we see the object as white. When objects absorb all light and reflect nothing we see black. Combinations of absorbed and reflected light are what form all other colors. Based on these observations, automotive-based scientists have begun to utilize the technological basis of color structure in regards to varied chemical make-ups. Chemical analysis and testing has led to the discovery and alteration of existing pigment shape and construction. This in turn has sparked the over pouring of available paint colors onto the market from multiple outlets.

PPG Harlequin paint was used for the covering of the bisqued tiles.. The pigments in this paint are flat, ultra-thin micron sized flakes composed of three layers – an opaque reflective aluminum center surrounded by a transparent layer topped with a semi-transparent metallic surface layer. All of these layers are actually colorless. The pigments filter and reflect light wavelengths back as the color you see. The visible colors are determined by how thick the layers are, which light wavelengths are reflected by the surface layer, and which light wavelengths are reflected from the core layer.

The shifting of the color is determined by the angle light strikes the surface as well as the direction the reflected light is seen. Straight on viewing will highlight the original color of the pigment, but altering the position of sight will enhance the overall capabilities of the material, thus resulting in the shift.



Figure #10

Influenced by Mark Rothko (Figure 10), my desire was to create an environment that would result in experience once approached. For as one draws near, the spherical pieces begin to saturate with color from an ominous dark green, almost purple tint, to a much more vibrant value. I chose a color that was dark from a far, but would rapidly change in regards to the viewer's position, thus requiring



the viewer to inherently interact with the mass as they moved about it. As they realized the shifting of color, they make a point to drastically manipulate their stance in hopes to gain a more dramatic shift.

Dynamism within color became Rothko's language, "*either their surfaces are expansive and push outward in all direction, or their surfaces contrast and rush inward in all directions. Between these two poles you can find everything I want to say.*" (15) This was his theoretical view on the effect of color and was how he defined his environmental boundaries of the work. Simple fundamentals transpired into a dynamic sensation of juxtaposition. Whether it was the use of warm and cool colors, contrasting shades, or gloss versus matte surfaces, a phenomenal marriage occurred. Fellow artist and Rothko enthusiast, Ellsworth Kelly mentions, "*I admire Rothko's brushwork. Rothko creates a sense of being one with the canvas. His painting seems to absorb color and glow.*" (16)

The atmosphere created by his rectangular work allowed a viewer to become one with the piece, often getting lost amongst the mixing of pigments. Adapting similar format, this *Modular Wall Structure* is reference to that of Rothko's work. The tiles that appear resting on the floor are one-third the span of the tiles grouped on the wall. While Rothko and Kelly employ the use of two-dimensional surface, this work exercises that of the three-dimensional. By using the undulating multiple, a harmonious sense of sensuality is achieved.



This constitution of exertion also touches on the roots of industry in relationship to the custom automotive world. 'Using these industrial methods, the piece was conceived. Multiple reproductions of an identical form were created through an assembly line like working conditions. Actions that carry no individual connection with the work aside from the exercise induced manual labor, it is the finishing of the form and surface that brings that to the forefront, but it is the use of light that brings it to life.

*"Simplicity is not an objective in art, but one achieves simplicity despite one's self by entering the real sense of things." Brancusi (17)*

## Conclusion

When all is said and done, I look back and see the transformation of both work and artist. The struggle to define a personal body of work in retrospect has also begun to define the artist in ways previously unbeknownst to him. While I am satisfied of the accomplishment, I am proud to say it is not the best work yet. I say with confidence the work will not define the artist completely. The entire process has been one of great learning experiences.

Approaching RIT and the School for American Crafts at first was a bit overwhelming. Feeling behind from the start, I let my sense of optimism guide me through the obscurities. Not only has it pushed me through barriers in school, it has continued to do so in the professional art world. My experience has left me with the sensation that I am a talented and capable artist, teacher and mentor for others. I am excited to move forward and instill the lessons taught to me, while also influencing others with similar lessons. I intend to create work dealing with similar theories and methods; however, I will always keep an open mind to new materials and opportunities. For who knows where they may guide me.

Again, I would like to thank my family and friends for their help and support. In regards to the *Modular Wall Structure*, I must thank all the individuals who donated hours of their time to assist in the sanding of tiles, as well as Josh LeMay and Will Funk. Josh and Will, assisted me throughout this forms entire creation and installation, while

also doing their own work and aiding other fellow graduates. Words cannot express the help they provided, thank you greatly. It has been a pleasure to work with people of this caliber. I would like to express gratitude to my committee, for you have trusted my unconventional methods and encouraged my growth. I thank you all.

*"We need not fear the expression of ideas – we do need to fear their suppression."  
Pres. Harry S. Truman*

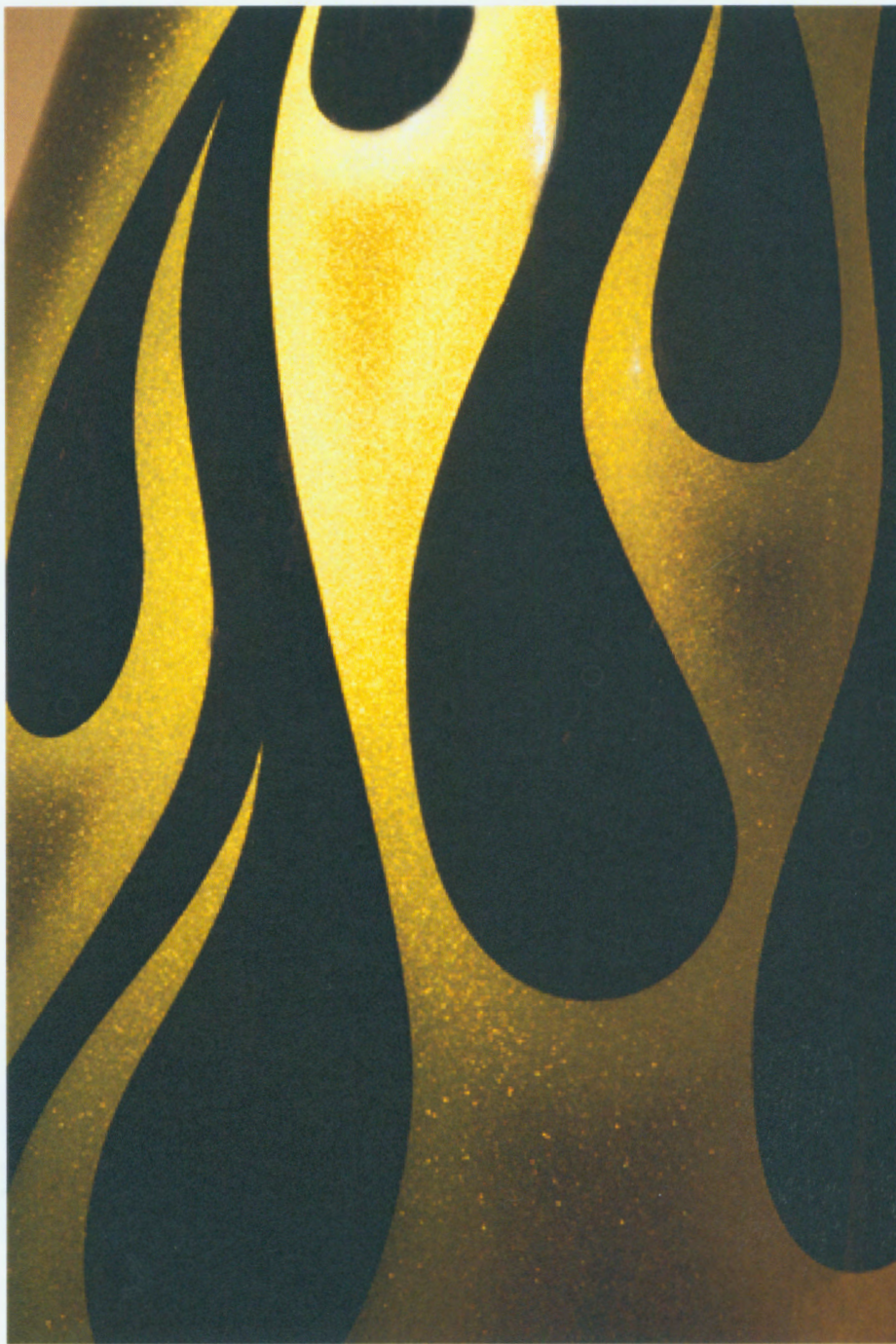
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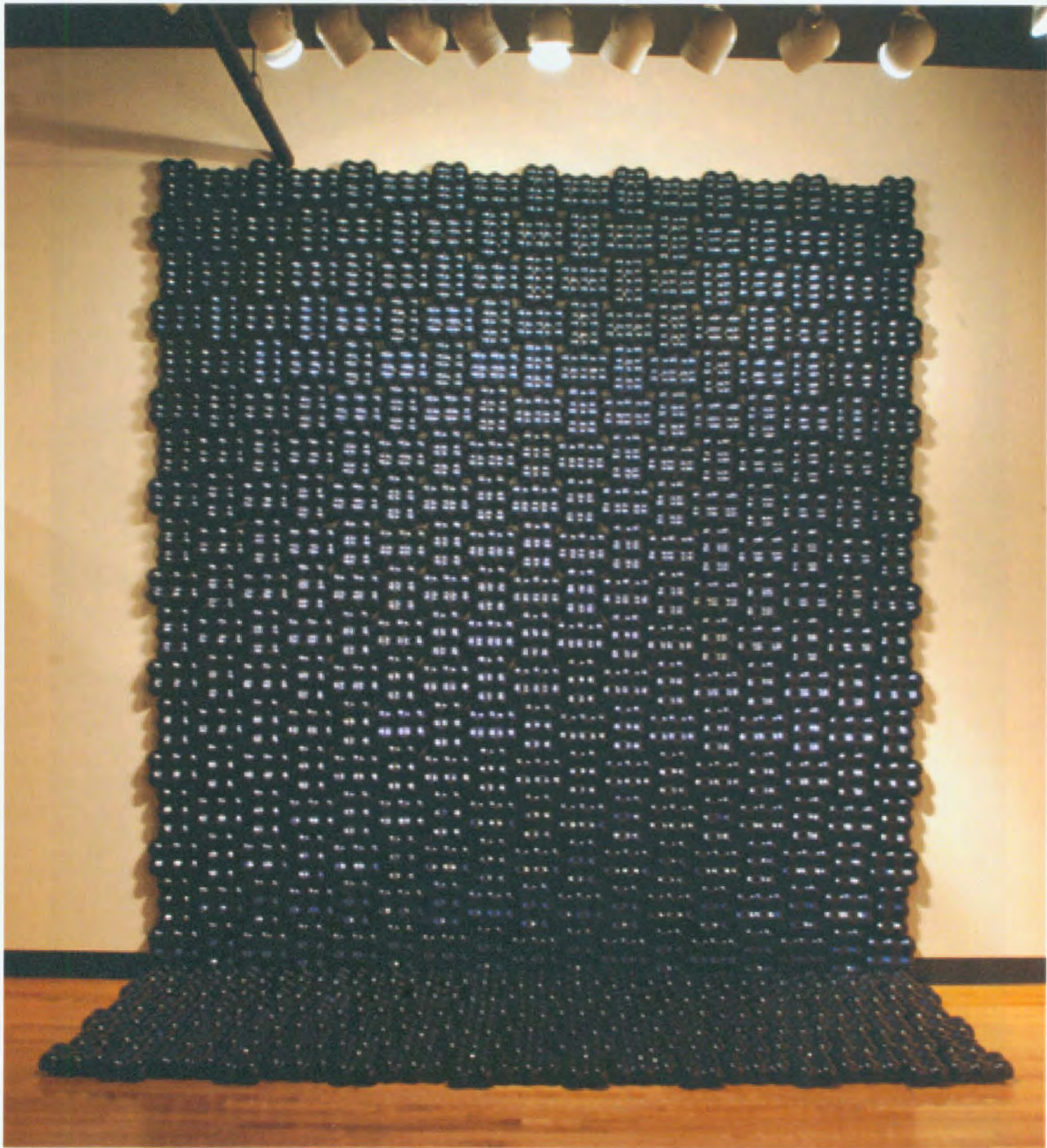
Triptych Tank Trio





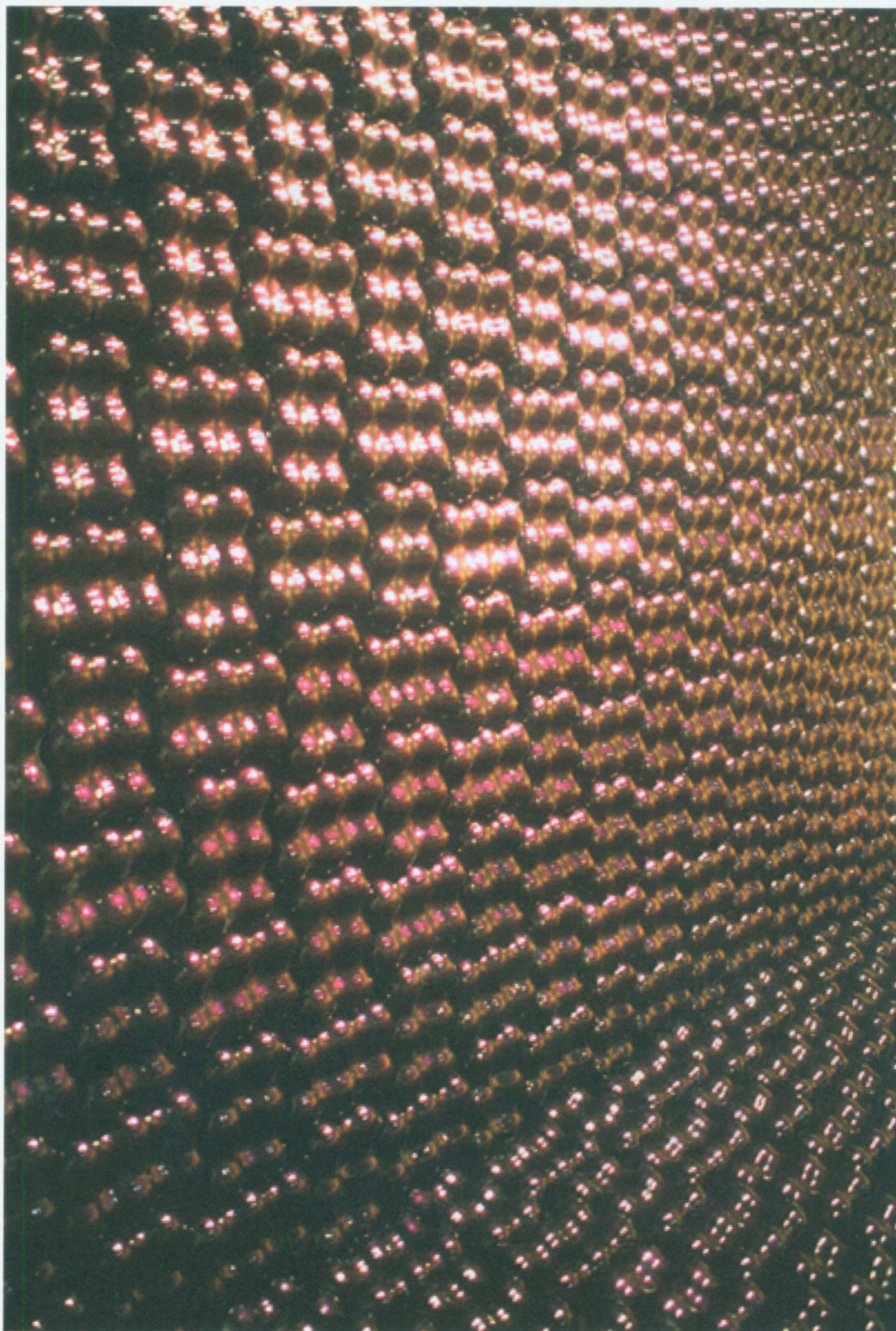
Triptych Tank Trio Detail





Modular Wall Structure





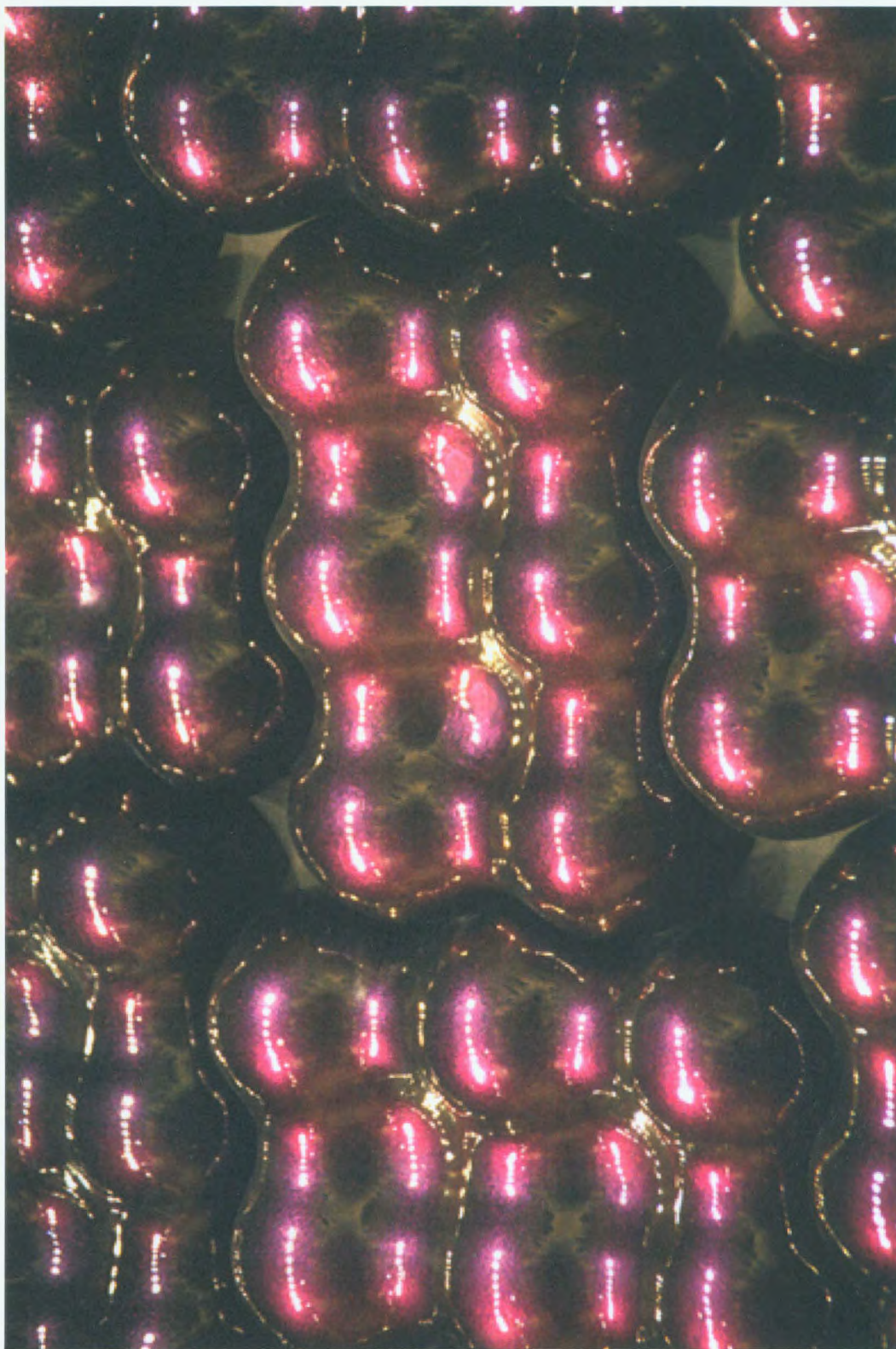
Modular Wall Structure  
(view from left side)





Modular Wall Structure  
(view of floor section)





Modular Wall Structure  
(upclose detail of tile)